European journal of American studies
Reviews 2015-4

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Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11157
ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher
European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference
Guillaume Marche, « May Joseph,Fluid New York: Cosmopolitan Urbanism and the Green Imagination », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2015-4, document 7, Online since 06 October 2015, connection on 03 May 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11157

May Joseph,Fluid New York: Cosmopolitan Urbanism and the Green Imagination

Guillaume Marche

1 In *Fluid New York: Cosmopolitan Urbanism and the Green Imagination*, May Joseph, a social science and cultural studies scholar, explores the history, experience, representations, and political implications of New York City's relation to its natural environment, especially its aquatic surroundings –be they rivers, harbor or ocean. Of particular interest to Joseph, and the reader, is New York's status as an archipelagic metropolis. While the book does not purport to provide a straightforward history of New York, since that history has already been written by others, to whom Joseph refers, the reader does learn a lot about the city's history – for instance about racial and ethnic diversity ever since the first Dutch colony and the traces of that early history that are left in the city today. In fact, Joseph approaches today's New York as a palimpsest of its history since the times of the encounter between Dutch settlers and Native Americans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, all the way to the early 2010s – the book's time-span ends with Hurricane Sandy, which was Joseph's actual impetus for writing. For example, the author offers an archaeology of the complex status of the turf in the southern part of Manhattan, which, unbeknownst to most New Yorkers, hosts a hidden necropolis of African

slaves and former slaves: Joseph views New York as literally haunted by this invisible, imperceptible, yet real presence.

2

What Joseph aims to highlight are the historical movements whereby New York's topographical substratum as a territory surrounded by water was gradually made less perceptible from the colonial times to the mid-twentieth century, until various natural disasters, allied with many New Yorkers' growing environmental conscience, forcefully brought this natural condition back to attention. For instance, the author recounts experiences whereby New Yorkers are faced with signs of the hills, rivers, swamps that used to define New York's topography, have been made invisible through urban growth, but do resurface in sometimes unexpected ways. Thus, says Joseph, for New York as for many comparable metropolises, the dilemma is to balance urban growth with preservation. Yet, the equation is made more complex for New York – due to its unique topography – and at the same time more emblematic – due to the city's remaining iconic status worldwide. Joseph thus accounts for the city's ambivalent record of destruction and conservation of heritage landmarks and communities in the past fifty years, but also highlights more recent efforts to reinvent New York's relationship to its environment. Interestingly, while the book – just like most of the city's civic and economic life – is very much centered on Manhattan, Joseph explores the significance of Manhattan's uniqueness as a relatively small island in what was for long one of the world's largest cities, by taking into account such factors as the experience of commuting, the diversity of communities living in the other boroughs, and the fluctuating hubs of urban innovativeness that spring up here and there in Brooklyn or Queens, for instance.

3

The book is theoretically grounded upon the notions of metropolitanism and cosmopolitanism, the former notion leaning toward a civil, administrative view of local city life, while the latter clearly emphasizes politics and civic engagement in the grander scheme of things:

> Metropolitanism is a condition of life as well as an approach to city planning and governance. . . . Cosmopolitanism, an aspect of metropolitan life, is a fraught and contingent ideal historically embedded in the very idea of the polis, or city. It contains the idea of world citizenship, a sense of belonging that exceeds the finite definitions of human association, such as nation, race, and language. . . . The inherent tensions between a regional metropolitanism and a pedestrian-centered political cosmopolitanism intertwine to produce New York's particular manifestation of fluid urbanism. (21–22)

4 The succession of Joseph's chapters thus take the reader through a detailed account of Dutch colonial cartography and its delineation of coasts and rivers, to the growth of the modern, industrial and commercial city, to new efforts at frugal urban living, to greening experiments, to the specific challenges of multiculturalism in an archipelagic urban environment. This account has its baddies and goodies, such as, respectively, Robert Moses, the urbanist who pushed in favor of the automobile's supremacy in New York's mid-twentieth century development, and Jane Jacobs, the 1960s community activist who led and inspired a movement for less growth, more conservation, in the face of development projects that would have basically annihilated Greenwich Village as we know it. Joseph also expounds her key ideas, such as New York's being paradigmatic of urban verticality (as opposed to the growing American model of horizontal urban sprawl from Los Angeles to Atlanta) or its status as the site of a unique confluence between rivers and ocean.

5 Among Joseph's most interesting and original ideas is her situating New York within a Dutch and, later, English colonial continuum. By setting her narrative in a broader, worldwide colonial and postcolonial context, Joseph at the same time challenges the idea that industrialized and Third-World countries are as essentially distinct, as many would be inclined to think, and highlights the specifics of American metropolitanism. Among the book's best passages are indeed chapters 5 and 6 – "Nomadic urbanism and frugality" and "Nyerere, the Dalai Lama, Gandhi" – where Joseph draws from such diverse inspirations as Weber, Simmel, Tönnies, the Dalai Lama, Gandhi, and the 1967 Arusha Declaration to make a case for a model of urbanism that is more environmentally-conscious, less driven by mercantile commodification, and more attuned to the public need for a collective form of urban citizenship. In subsequent chapters, Joseph also accounts for the City's efforts to green itself since the end of the Giuliani era, under the Bloomberg municipal administration. She views this shift as a major qualitative change because, unlike top-down bureaucratic management, it takes into account some of the ideas that have sprung up from citizen initiatives, such as community gardens, urban cycling, as well as the sheer physical appropriation of urban space through running, swimming, and a variety of festivals. Yet, Joseph also blames the city's unpreparedness for environmental catastrophe and contrasts New York with other coastal cities – including Third-World metropolises – that have

accomplished far more in terms of transforming their infrastructures in the context of climate change.

6

In fact, a further originality in the book is that the author situates her research in relation to her personal history of growing up in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, at the time of independence, when the new nation pursued the then-common path of Third-World socialism. Joseph thus not only contrasts New York's metropolitanism and cosmopolitanism with cities in developing countries, but also invokes the Cold War context when there were such things as a First World (capitalist), a Second World (socialist), and a Third World. Further, the author stages and represents her own experience of writing, but also of living in New York. This is not limited to the introduction, as a way to situate the book-project for the reader – a rather customary thing for a contemporary scholar to do: instead, throughout the book, Joseph's text is enriched with impressions of events attended, observed, or simply chanced upon. This endows the text with both a documentary dimension and a testimonial vein, since Joseph does not simply provide the equivalent of field-notes, but also presents her personal experience – including in some especially moving details at the end of the book – as part of the research itself.

7

Joseph's account of fluid New York thus proceeds malleably and diachronically to remind readers of what lies below – literally – today's cityscape, not merely for the sake of illustration, let alone erudition, but so that the temporal element may warrant some degree of critical distance about the actual meaning, both symbolical and political, with which the urban environment is invested. In fact, readers with a social scientific turn of mind may be somewhat disappointed with the book's lack of an analysis of hard empirical facts and get the overall impression of a cultural commentary given somewhat *in abstracto*. Yet, as she emphasizes malleability versus fixity, and experience versus structure, Joseph does cite such authors as Goffman and de Certeau. Surprisingly, though, she neither cites Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* whose legacy, along with Baudelaire's, looms so large upon most contemporary writing on city-life and urban *flânerie*, nor Chicago School sociologists like Ernst Burgess or Louis Wirth whose theoretical and ethnographic work on urban ecology, ethnic succession, and urbanism as a way of life seem akin to Joseph's take on how a city's environments are constructed

by and through the experience of flesh and blood people physically inhabiting urban space – rather than preexisting structures simply, one-directionally conditioning life in New York. A further surprising blind spot in the book is that, even though Joseph does mention gentrification here and there (e.g. 67, 145, 147), she does not make it a theme of her discussion; nor does she make democracy an issue per se, even as her discussion of municipal accountability, cooperation, and governance (e.g. 202–203) would seem to point in that direction. Accordingly the terms are not even indexed. The text itself is not exempt from rather wordy passages[1] and questionable interpretations, as when Joseph does ascribe to Max Weber's analysis of the protestant ethic or to Ferdinand Tönnies distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* undue prescriptive intents.[2]

8

But the book makes a unique contribution to scholarship thanks to the breadth of its time-span, its original interdisciplinary methodology, and the perspective it offers on how New Yorkers can, and do, reinvent their city through a wide range of initiatives.

NOTES

1. E.g. "Yet, the language of metropolitanism eludes daily parlance. As a discourse, metropolitanism permeates city life without translating its intimacies into a vernacular of dailiness." (71)

2. "Weber advocates austerity as a way of socially managing the desires of the unruly body." (106; emphasis added) "Nostalgic for supposedly binding forms of community embedded in a fast-disappearing folk culture, Tönnies articulates a rising sense of alienation at the end of the nineteenth century."(109; emphasis added)

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